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CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE AFFAIR AT  
HARPER'S FERRY.

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# S E R M O N

PREACHED IN THE INDIANA PLACE CHAPEL,

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SUNDAY MORNING, NOV. 6, 1859.

BY JAMES FREEMAN CLARKE.

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There is but one subject upon which we can think this morning. Last Wednesday, a man was sentenced to death on the charge of exciting Slaves to Insurrection, of Treason against the State of Virginia, and of Murder. Probably many technical objections might fairly be raised against the verdict, and against the conduct of the Court. But his conviction was a foregone conclusion—it could not be avoided. Men who do such things as he did, set their life on a cast, and must be ready to stand the hazard of the die. He was thus ready—he is ready. From first to last he has shown no wavering, no desire to save his life. His whole course has been so convincingly conscientious, manly, truthful, and heroic, that his enemies have been compelled to honor him. For the first time within our memory, the whole North and South seem to be united in one opinion and one sentiment—the opinion that this attempt of Brown was unwise and unwarranted—the sentiment of respect for the man himself, as a Hero.

You have heard little from this pulpit upon the subject of Slavery for several years. In that time I have scarcely alluded to it; never spoken upon it at length. The reason of my abstinence was simply this, that I saw no necessity for speaking. The subject is being so thoroughly discussed in Congress, in the Legislatures, in the newspapers, in public meetings, and in private discussion, that it does not now seem so necessary to speak of it in the pulpit. But such an event as this calls up too many thoughts to allow me to be silent; and I therefore choose for my subject, “THE CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES OF THE LATE

AFFAIR AT HARPER'S FERRY." And I take for my text the twentieth verse of the sixth chapter of Mark :

*"And Herod feared John, knowing that he was a just man."*

An attempt has been made to ascribe this event to the teachings of the Anti-Slavery party in this country. Well, they *are* the cause of it, in one sense, just as Samuel Adams and Josiah Quincy, James Otis and Patrick Henry were the cause of the bloodshed at Lexington and Bunker's Hill ; and just as the preaching of Christianity was the cause of the religious wars which followed. Whoever opposes tyranny and wrong in any shape, with words, will often cause a conflict of deeds to follow. Jesus said, "*I came not to send peace, but a sword.*" He knew that his teachings would not be peaceably accepted—would be resisted—and that bloodshed would follow. But where rests the responsibility? Not on Jesus, though his Gospel has been the occasion of war ; not on James Otis and Patrick Henry, though their words were the occasion of war ; not on those who oppose evil, but on those who maintain and defend it. Therefore, not on Anti-Slavery teaching, but on Pro-Slavery teaching, North and South, on the men and newspapers in Washington and Boston, who unite with the oppressors to put down Freedom and quench its light in the blood of its advocates ; on these and such as these rests the responsibility of this tragedy.

I. — The first cause of this sad affair is SLAVERY itself.

There is an "irrepressible conflict" between Freedom and Slavery. The opposition is radical and entire ; there can be no peace nor permanent truce between them, till one has conquered the other. Either Slavery is right or it is wrong. The radical question is this : — Can one man belong to another, as his property, or not? To this question there can be but two answers — *Yes* or *No*. There is no intermediate answer.

To this question the whole country formerly said No. North and South, every one used to say that Slavery was wrong. The great minds at the South — Washington, Jefferson, Patrick Henry, Madison, Monroe, Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina — all believed that Slavery was wrong in principle and bad in its influence, and must gradually come to an end. The evidence of



this is ample. One fact I will mention. The territory north and west of the Ohio was consecrated to Freedom and secured against Slavery by a proviso, passed by the votes of southern as well as northern statesmen. When, afterwards, the people of the Territory of Indiana petitioned Congress to be allowed to hold Slaves for a time, on account of the difficulty in procuring free labor, their petition was reported adversely upon, by a committee, the chairman of which was Randolph of Virginia, who said, "They will thank us hereafter for rejecting their petition."

At that time all admitted that Slavery, in its principle and in the abstract, was wrong; and all said, "We expect, by degrees and gradually, to put an end to it."

There was no war then between Slavery and Freedom; no "irrepressible conflict;" for all were on the side of Freedom.

But time passed by and Slavery did not come to an end. The immense expansion in the consumption of cotton, and its increasing price — the demand always overlapping the supply — made its culture the most profitable work done in America; and this work was most easily and cheaply done by Slaves. At the end of a generation from the death of Washington, Slavery had become vastly more profitable in the Southern States than it was in his days. Now, the South *did not wish* Slavery to come to an end. It wished it to continue. I do not say that the Slaveholders were worse in this than other people. Their misfortune was to be exposed to a tremendous temptation, and they yielded to it. The people of New England might have yielded too, if they had been exposed to that temptation.

This was the first great change; this the essential change; this change of desire and wish — all the rest has followed that. For, though single men are illogical and inconsistent, mankind is logical and consistent. In the long run, people will either act as they believe, or else believe as they act. The Slaveholders were believing one way, but determined to act another. The situation was painful, and they broke away from it. Never was such a revolution in opinion as that which has taken place at the South within the last twenty years, on the subject of Slavery. Twenty years ago, nine Slaveholders out of ten would tell you they thought Slavery wrong; to-day, nine out of ten will tell you they think it right. So logical is man. As they made up their wills to extend, and not abolish Slavery, they presently made up their

minds to believe it right, and not wrong—a Christian Institution; a missionary enterprise; based on the Bible, and in accordance with the highest principles of duty.

I know very well that there was a transition period. While this great change of public opinion was going on, it was covered up and concealed with fine phrases. This was the period of what Bentham calls “*Fallacious Designations*.” Bentham says “the object and effect of a *Fallacious Designation* is to avoid any unpleasant idea that happens to be associated with a person or class, and to present to the mind instead an abstraction or creation of fancy.” Thus, says he,

Instead of ‘Kings or the King,’ you say ‘The Crown or Throne.’

“ “ ‘Churchmen,’ “ “ ‘The Church or Altar.’

“ “ ‘Lawyers,’ “ “ ‘The Law.’

“ “ ‘A Judge,’ “ “ ‘The Court.’

“ “ ‘Rich Men,’ “ “ ‘Property.’

“ “ ‘Killing a Man,’ “ “ ‘Capital Punishment.’

So in this country we said,

Instead of ‘Slavery,’ ‘Southern Institutions.’

“ “ ‘Slaveholders,’ ‘The South.’

A good deal was accomplished in this way by the Slaveholders. Thus, in 1850, when it was proposed to exclude Slavery, by law, from the new Territories, it was said in reply,—“The South has a right to take its property into the territory purchased by its own treasure and blood.” Translated into plain Saxon English, this meant, “Three hundred thousand Slaveholders, in the Slave States, rich enough to own, on an average, ten negroes each, insist, against the interest of thirteen million in the Free States, of six million of Non-Slaveholders in the Slave States, and of three million of Slaves, to carry Slaves into territories where there are none now, and to have the laws changed to let them do it.” Mr. Calhoun first established this “*Fallacious Designation*” of ‘The South’ instead of ‘The Slaveholders.’ And, in his last great speech in the United States Senate, he carried it so far as to complain that in the annexation of new territory to the Union, “the North had obtained more than the South,”—not meaning that more territory situated at the North had been annexed, but that more had been secured to Freedom than to Slavery.

In the same way, in the Free States, we always have had a party who wish to cover up and conceal the radical opposition of



Slavery to Freedom, and Freedom to Slavery; to daub the wall with untempered mortar — to cry peace when there is no peace. They also make great use of these “Fallacious Designations.” They say ‘Our Southern Brethren;’ meaning, not the four million Slaves, nor the six million Non-Slaveholders at the South, but the three hundred thousand Slaveholders only.

But logic is too strong for phrases. Those who wish to postpone the deluge till their time is past, and to leave it as a legacy to their children and grand-children, find themselves more and more helpless in the increasing earnestness of the hour. The two parties, consisting of those who believe Slavery right and those who believe it wrong, are like the upper and the nether millstone; small, compared with the great bags and heaps of corn lying near them, but destined to go round and round till they have ground it all to powder.

Those who believe Slavery right, labor to fortify, extend, and strengthen it. They have passed the Fugitive Slave Law, defeated the Wilmot Proviso, repealed the Missouri Compromise, obtained the Dred Scott decision, and have determined next to re-open the African Slave Trade, and annex Cuba. No phraseology about “Our Southern Brethren,” or “Safety of the Union,” can conceal these facts.

On the other hand, there is a party which hold Slavery to be wrong. They hold it to be a wild and guilty fantasy that man can claim property in man. With John Wesley, they consider Slavery to be the sum of all villany. Holding this, they believe that the Slave has a right to assert his freedom whenever he can do so; he has a right to take possession of himself with the strong hand if he can. That which he has a right to do we may lawfully help him do, if we violate no other right in doing it; and we cannot lawfully oppose his doing it in any case. For the Slave either belongs to his master or to himself. If he belongs to his master, he is a thief if he tries to escape. If he belongs to himself, his master is a thief if he tries to keep him, and we are kidnapping if we assist his master in taking him. When Anthony Burns was taken down State Street, and the people on each side hoarsely roared “kidnappers! kidnappers!” at the soldiers who guarded him — their faces showed that they felt the truth of the charge. We may wear on our hat the cockade of the United States Marshal, or we may be called out as a military company, covered with

feathers and gold lace, but that does not vacate the principle. We are kidnappers and man-stealers still.

Here is the irrepressible conflict—which may be concealed under heaps of words, smothered by fine phrases, hidden by the exigencies of trade, of party politics, of sectarian ecclesiasticism—but which, like fire which you try to put out with mountainous heaps of straw, burns on and on till it breaks forth at last in a wide, destroying flame.

Here is the fundamental and primary cause of the Harper's Ferry affair—the antagonism between Slavery and Freedom. Any one who believes that Slavery is right must logically regard John Brown as a robber and brigand. But those who believe Slavery wrong; who justify the American Revolution; who admire Washington for contending with sword and fire against the government of Britain to free an oppressed people; who eulogize Lafayette for coming to aid us in that struggle; must believe John Brown to be a hero, and the martyr to a principle. The only ground on which they can find fault with him is for attempting prematurely what he had not power to accomplish; that is, for an error of judgment as regards means. It is true that no man has a right to encourage in any way a Revolution unless there is good reason for believing that it will succeed. The best cause will not authorize life to be needlessly thrown away. If a man thinks he sees enough good in prospect to justify him in throwing away his own life, he may do so on his own responsibility—but he ought not to waste the blood of others. But Brown did not mean to act recklessly—his character forbids that supposition. He was mistaken then—he erred in judgment as to what he could effect. He did not intend an insurrection, he says, but only an escape of fugitives. He is a man of truth, and I believe him.

II.—The second cause of this affair is False Conservatism at the North.

It is not with the purpose of retaliating charges made against Anti-Slavery men, but to express a conviction I have held for years, that I say,—if the dark problem of Slavery finds a bloody solution—that blood will cry from the ground against those who, for years, have been steadily laboring at the North to let down the sentiment of Freedom—the Traitors at home who have given moral aid and comfort to the Slave-power. Had it not



been for these, we should have resisted successfully the Annexation of Texas, or passed the Wilmot Proviso, or defeated the Fugitive Slave Law, or the Repeal of the Missouri Compromise. The Slave-power, defeated on these points, would have ceased from its aggressions ; the lovers of Freedom at the South would have been encouraged ; the border States would have been led to take measures for emancipation. Gradually, peacefully, and joyfully the cause of Freedom would have grown strong, that of Slavery weak — until, at last, surrounded by the hosts of Free labor, by emigrants from the North, by invading light and advancing religion ; hemmed in by all this illumination and warmth, like the scorpion girt with fire, it would have turned its sting against itself —

The sting it nurtured for its foes,  
Whose venom never yet was vain,  
Gives but one pang and ends all pain.

But as if on a steamer, running at high pressure, men should be frightened at the noise made by escaping steam and so shut down the safety-valve and call the silence safety — so with us, these quietists think all danger to arise from noisy Anti-Slavery people at the North, and try to stop that noise. They think the danger, not from Slavery, but from talking about it ; and so are themselves the cause of the evil they try to shun.

III. — The third cause of this Harper's Ferry tragedy is to be found in the low condition of the Religion of the country.

In such a conflict as that between Slavery and Freedom, Christianity, organized in churches, embodied in Christian men and women, should have come forward, to speak the Truth in Love. Holding fast to the Eternal Law of God, rising high above all considerations of mere expediency ; it should have declared God's word supreme — above all politics, all legal enactments, all State necessity. Man, made in the image of God, cannot be the slave of his brother man. Proclaiming this, it should also have uttered it in love ; with sympathy for the Slaveholder as well as the Slave ; with perception of his difficult and dangerous position, of his strong temptations, and with an earnest desire to aid him by common sacrifices.

Unfortunately, little of this has been done. On the one side the supremacy of God's law has not been maintained, but we

have been taught from a thousand pulpits that man's lower law must be obeyed and not the law of conscience ; on the other hand, when the truth has been uttered, it has not been always uttered in love to the Slaveholder, but often in bitterness, sarcasm, and contempt. In saying this I do not refer to professed Abolitionists alone. I think that we are always in danger of being unjust to those whom we do not personally know. It is not easy, at this distance, to be just to Slaveholders. But certainly there has often been a hard cold tone of invective used against the South ; which is unjust, because it does not recognize their difficulty and their efforts ; unchristian, because it does not feel toward them as to brethren.

The opposers of Slavery have sometimes opposed it more in the spirit of Elijah than in that of Christ — with fierce rebuke, with wild invective ; and at last, as in the present instance, with the sword and rifle.

John Brown has been taught Christianity by a Church, which, binding up in one volume the Old and New Testament, calls them both the Christian Bible, and gives equal authority to the one as to the other. He is an Old Testament Christian ; a Christian who believes in the sword of the Lord and of Gideon. Bred a Calvinist of the strictest sect in Connecticut, and holding firmly to his faith, he shares all the great and noble qualities that faith has so often produced, together with its frequent alloy. He is such a man as Calvinism produced in the Scotch Covenanters, in the men of Cromwell's Ironside Regiment, who did not do the work of the Lord negligently at Naseby and at Worcester. To this is added a touch of chivalric devotion and inspired enthusiasm, such as nerved the arm of the Maid of Orleans and of Charlotte Corday.

Let me give you an authentic anecdote of his strict and impartial sense of justice. Some years ago, when living in Western Pennsylvania, or on the Ohio Reserve, he found a man whom he believed to be a horse-thief. He arrested him and took him to jail. The man was convicted and sent to prison. But while he was in prison, John Brown furnished the man's family with provisions and clothing. The man had committed a crime, and Brown's sense of justice required that he should be punished. His wife and children had not committed any crime, and Brown's sense of justice would not allow them to be punished for another's



fault. The man who told this story is now Sheriff, I think, in Crawford County, Pennsylvania, and was at that time a boy in Brown's family, and was himself sent to town to buy flour and carry it to the house of the convict.

These are the three causes of this tragedy: — *First*, the radical hostility growing ever stronger between Slavery and Freedom. *Secondly*, the false Conservatism at the North, which, dividing our strength, has prevented Freedom from crushing the propagandism of Slavery in the bud. And, *Thirdly*, a Christianity which could not speak the truth with power, and at the same time with love. These three causes will produce the like effects again, only more terrible, unless some help comes from God's providence and man's fidelity.

Let us see if such help is likely to come. What will be the consequences of this affair?

I have heard it said that there will be no marked result from this event; that the waves will close over the head of this misguided but honored champion of the forlorn, and that in six months the world will scarcely remember him or his actions.

I cannot think so. To me this event seems freighted with consequences. It is like the clock, striking the fatal hour — the hour of the beginning of a new era in this conflict. There is something solemn, something ominous in this transaction. While we are talking, arguing, making speeches, having Anti-Slavery fairs and Anti-Slavery pic-nics; here is this old man, with his sons, taking his life and their lives, and going calmly forward to strike a blow at the heart of this system. You may call it madness, insanity — what you will — but it is the madness of Curtius leaping into the gulf which yawned in the forum; the insanity of the Roman Consul, who, dedicating himself to the infernal gods, plunged alone and in full armor into the ranks of the enemy, as a sacrifice for his nation.

It is the madness of Arnold of Winkleried, gathering into his bosom the deadly sheaf of spears — the madness of the three hundred who went to die at Thermopylæ — of the six hundred who rode into the Jaws of Hell, to perish in vain, because it was their duty to do and die. It is a kind of insanity of which a few specimens are scattered along the course of the human race — and wherever they are found, they make the glory of human nature, and give us



more faith in God and man. Such men die, but their act lives forever —

Their memory wraps the dusky mountain,  
 Their spirit sparkles in the fountain,  
 The meanest rill, the mightiest river,  
 Rolls, mingling with their fame forever.

You cannot get away from it. Call it fanaticism, folly, madness, wickedness — it rises before you still with its calm, marble features, more terrible in defeat and death than in life and victory — the awful lineaments of Conscience. It is one of those acts of madness which History cherishes, and which Poetry loves forever to adorn with her choicest wreaths of laurel.

One consequence of the event will be, I cannot but think, the arousing of the nation's conscience. A thoroughly conscientious act awakens conscience in others. I have already mentioned its effect at the South. It has commanded respect where we might have expected violence. The quality of courage and nobleness in the man, in all his words and his whole manner, have evidently produced a most extraordinary impression. No bravado, no timidity — no concealment, no ostentation — perfect manliness, truth, and honesty, have been so conspicuous, that these qualities have touched the higher natures of Southern men, and awakened genuine feelings of respect and admiration. The Slaveholders have at last seen, face to face, a specimen of their “*bête noir*” — an Abolitionist. They find themselves compelled to respect him. Governor Wise now knows what an Abolitionist is; and finds him not a man wishing to murder women and children; but tender to noncombatants, careful of his prisoners' lives, doing no needless harm, but knowing no such thing as fear. Our text says that “*Herod feared John, knowing him to be a just man.*” This is one of those wonderful touches which mark the insight of the Scripture. The tyrant on his throne, surrounded by his soldiers, backed by the mighty power of Rome, was afraid of the prophet in his prison — afraid of him in his tomb — “*knowing him to be a just man.*” The awful majesty of Justice penetrated through guards and courtiers, ante-rooms and festival chambers, and caused a thrill of terror to pass through the monarch's soul. So the Herod of Slavery fears John Brown, in his prison; will continue to fear him, in his tomb — “*knowing him to be a just man.*”

Ten thousand Southern pulpits have been proving that because Abraham held Slaves, and Paul sent back Onesimus, therefore it is no violation of the golden rule to work negroes to death on the rice plantations of South Carolina and the sugar coast of the Mississippi. Ten thousand able editors, popular orators, and philosophic professors have been proving the same thing from statistics, ethnology, and anatomy. But here comes Old John Brown, believing Slavery a sin, and believing it so much as to fling his life away; and in their hearts and souls, the reverend and learned arguers feel that they are sophists, with no truth in them.

When such a deed is done, it is not the actual deed, but that which it announces, that is terrific. How many more John Browns may there not be behind? — so say in their souls to-day the whole population south of Mason's and Dixon's Line. This may be only the first drop of the coming shower. True, the whole writing and speaking public at the North disavows and condemns the deed, but what do those think of it, who, like John Brown himself, do not talk, but act? I cannot tell — neither can you. I know that great crimes and great virtues are contagious. Suicide is contagious. Murder is contagious. It may be that many a man, sitting comfortably in his easy chair, when he read the account, "wished himself accursed he was not there" too. We may be to-day on the brink of a civil war. A crusade is attractive to thousands, whether it be in the form of fillibustering against Cuba, invading Kansas from Missouri, invading Missouri from Kansas, following Peter the Hermit to Palestine, or following other John Browns into Virginia. I do not believe in these crusades, any of them. I think them all bad and wrong. But woe to the man by whom the offence cometh.

A better result than this will be the swift depletion of the border States of their Slaves, and the turning of them into the ranks of the Free. The Governor of Virginia already announces that no Slaves can be kept near the border who wish to escape. And one reason why no Slaves joined in this insurrection is, no doubt, that most of those who wished Freedom had already gone away. If the blow had been struck further south, it might have had a different effect on the Slave population.

There is a sad day before us. We shall be obliged to wait in silence, knowing that the soul of this hero is departing from the scaffold to the invisible world. But as the motive sanctifies the



action, so it also glorifies the doom. The man will go to his death in the same great spirit in which he has thus far spoken and lived. Could his life be spared, I should be grateful; if not, I must remember

That whether on the scaffold high,  
Or in the battle's van,  
The fittest place for man to die  
Is where he dies for man.

One lesson let us not fail to gather: The only thing of much worth in life is the spirit in which a man acts. Not what we do, but the *motive* of the action, is the great thing. Since this affray, and the deaths at Harper's Ferry, there has been a violent and extensive conflict at the polls at Baltimore, and perhaps as many men killed. But who thinks of that? Who cares for it? Who knows anything about it? The motive was ignoble, a mere political squabble; and they who were killed died like dogs. But here the motive was noble, and they who were shot down, fighting for it, fell like martyrs, and lie soiled with no unbecoming dust.

The times are dark, and may become darker. I do not expect much from political parties, or from popular elections. But I have faith in the Divine Providence — faith in the coming Kingdom of Jesus Christ — faith that He, the Master, shall yet come to reign in hearts grateful for his love, and in minds submissive to his will. And, returning from the contemplation of these events, marching by us in the steady progress of history, to our own private life and duty, let us imitate the conscience and the devotion to right of all these heroic souls, and seek also for the faith in a Divine Love which shall sweeten the harsh rebuke with charity, and warm our souls with a hope full of everlasting peace and joy. Condemning all violence, bloodshed, and war, let us overcome evil with good, and, whenever we speak the Truth, speak it also in Love.





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